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Notes on The Shattered Crystal Ball: Fear and Learning in the Cuban Missile Crisis, by James G. Blight

emphasis...the number one goal of the United States and the Soviet Union [is] to avoid a nuclear war, a goal which in turn is judged by all who concern themselves professionally with these matters to mean that we must avoid deep crises that might lead to war."

not required - proper: on the contrary, VN-M action

The necessity of avoiding crises like CII is often cited, by participants like McNamara and others, as the central lesson of CII.

But does that mean, for any of them or for any analyst making this point, that they have come to feel that CII itself should have been avoided, in terms of the US reaction to the Soviet missiles? It was this reaction, after all, which defined or determined or triggered the "crisis". Or if this is disputed, at the very least the US reaction was a necessary element in establishing a dangerous crisis.

Has any former defender of the US public policy ever switched toward reconsidering the necessity or prudence of the US blockade or ultimatums: e.g. in light of the new evidence of the last two years?

After all, it was not the case that every member of the ExComm first reacted to news of the missiles by assuming that their presence constituted or compelled a crisis in foreign policy (though they obviously determined a domestic "crisis" for the Administration, in the election campaign). Assumptions to the contrary are mistaken; assertions to the contrary by participants are false.

The "lesson" of the crisis leads to the question: Should CII have been averted by Kennedy, if not by Khrushchev? Should Kennedy have avoided creating a crisis, given Khrushchev's action (which, we now know, was in large part a response to Kennedy's covert actions against Cuba and preparations for invasion, and to US deployments to Turkey)?

To say "yes" easily and unequivocally--despite what we now know of the real assessments by the President, his closest advisors, and the SecDef--is to deprive the supposed lesson of much content. If a major crisis was "unavoidable, necessary, appropriate" under those

circumstances, then avoiding dangerous crises cannot be understood to be such an overriding priority after all.

The lesson would then seem to come down to a lesson for the Soviets alone; or at any rate, for both sides to avoid decisions "like Khrushchev's."

NOTES:

67: Inadvertence: "paradoxically initiated nuclear war."

Inadvertent "because ^{was} in normal times, or even at the outset of such a crisis, leaders ^{could} were not have believed that they eventually ^{could} come to believe such a thing." [i.e., that "leaders' basic beliefs will become inverted regarding the relative worth of initiating a nuclear war."]

In such a crisis, striking first--or, first use--appears optimal, or is a candidate for optimality, requiring consideration.

It is a situation "so relentlessly perverse, so apparently devoid of satisfactory options, that nuclear war is actually initiated."

But this situation is, in practical terms, easily specified: it is one in which an enemy first strike becomes "thinkable," or there is evidence or reason to believe that an enemy first strike "soon" is near-certain or highly likely (strategic warning), or may actually be underway (tactical warning).

JB assumes that "in normal times" leaders would not have believed that they ever would come to believe such a thing. "Under normal conditions" they believe (p. 68) that "No sane leader will want to start a nuclear war, under any circumstances," and "Purely accidental nuclear war or nuclear war via insanity is practically inconceivable."

Yet JB does not confront the fact that nuclear postures are designed on the assumption that strategic or tactical warning is conceivable, and that the appropriate response may be preemption. Both the circumstances and the response not only shape weapons and force posture, but they are endlessly rehearsed.

Is it possible that in the actual crisis, the circumstances, and possible response, are nevertheless experienced as "previously inconceivable," a sort of negative miracle?

Perhaps so. But this is not because, in fact, there was a total failure earlier to postulate and contemplate the possible of such a state of affairs, by anyone in authority (e.g., SAC), or even an absence of elaborate preparations and rehearsals.

Suppose we conceive a situation that is subjectively regarded as "unthinkable" even though it is being thought of almost constantly; as "virtually impossible" even it is being constantly prepared for, at great effort and expense. When it occurs, it comes as a shattering surprise, even though preparation for it has been a major societal project for many years.

How understand such a paradox? a) The preparations were meant to be deterrent, and they were expected to deter successfully, with almost total assurance.

(b) The above explanation does not entirely apply to "damage-limiting" preparations, which are explicitly posited on the possibility that deterrence might fail. But at least in part, and for some advocates, these two are touted as "deterrent," even as necessary for deterrence (the logic is obscure or unconvincing for Type I Deterrence--deterrence of nuclear attack--but applies to Type II Deterrence--deterrence of non-nuclear attack on allies). Thus a failure of deterrence could still come as a "total" surprise to those who had pursued damage-limiting preparations.

c) Moreover, D-L (damage-limiting) might really have been pursued for other reasons, despite total disbelief in the possibility that they might actually be called upon in a nuclear war, or might work effectively then. Star Wars is a recent example of such reasons: outflanking the peace movement and blocking arms reduction agreements, keeping a profitable and politically rewarding arms race going; subsidizing high technology; getting credit for insuring against possible war from those members of the public who do believe in the possibility. In the case of offensive counterforce: keeping certain firms and industries in production; keeping certain Services happy, with their advocates in Congress; keeping up regional employment...

d) The political leadership might totally disbelieve in some possibilities, but "prepare" for them or insure against them to satisfy subordinate Service bureaucracies that do believe in them.

e) Certain preparations, once initiated because the possibilities of use were actually believed in, might continue for inertial--and ideological--reasons though belief in the contingencies had totally eroded.

f) The "threat" might be politically useful, to integrate and mobilize an alliance (NATO) or support the hegemony of its dominant member, even though not really believed in by officials; preparations might be required to validate the threat, to appear to believe in the threat.

Thus, preparations may not signify that the contingency ostensibly being prepared for is, subjectively, assigned any large probability or even any positive probability at all: it might be seen as "impossible, unimaginable, unthinkable" (though, to repeat, these last two terms should be understood as metaphoric or somewhat rhetorical, since the contingency is being imagined and thought about, despite its "impossibility").

But what of the fact that the preparations themselves--for damage-limiting by preemptive strike--especially when occurring on both sides, might make the actual contingency (actual fear, possibly well-grounded--of an imminent enemy first strike) more likely in certain circumstances? (This supposes a special case of "insurance," in which the preparations that "insure" or "hedge" against the adverse consequences of a certain event can make this event more likely, in certain circumstances. This seems to be the case with "damage-limiting insurance.")

If this "makes sense," if it appears a plausible possibility, should it not lead to assigning some positive probability to the contingency at all times (given the preparations on both sides)? Should not the notion of its "impossibility" be rejected? Yet is it plausible that despite this connection, preparations might be pursued while the event being prepared for is still seen as "impossible"?

Perhaps. a) The connection, the potential danger of this "insurance" might not be well understood, especially by some high civilian officials.

b) Though understood as a theoretical possibility, the actual impact might be regarded as negligible. (Thus, McGeorge Bundy and

many others--even, Halperin and Paine, as well as York and McNamara--see the instabilities caused by preparations for preemption as slight or negligible. Like Forsberg, (FAS...), Clifford Johnson, or Howard Morland, I do not.)

c) The very fact that this situation would be horrendous means that psychological denial or numbing could affect even those (like myself) who do worry about the possibility and act to avert it. In a long period without crises, and facing mental resistance, disbelief, or apathy from most listeners, our own resistance might come to be inertial, "going through the motions," so that the actual occasion would seem even to us--still more to our former audiences (despite their having heard it from us)--as not merely the occurrence of an unlikely event but as "astounding," as like the occurrence of the previously unthinkable or unimagined (despite our prolonged, somewhat noisy campaign).

In other words, another Cuban Missile Crisis, or "something worse," could be as surprising to officials as World War I was to officials then: despite prior elaborate and prolonged preparations for such a situation in both cases. (In the case of WWI, civilian officials had generally been unaware of the nature of military preparations, or their dangerous implications). That is the sense in which a war coming out of such a crisis would be "inadvertent."

To elaborate on JB's definition, "It is an inadvertent process because, in normal times, or even at the outset of such a crisis, leaders would not have believed that they eventually would come to believe such a thing [that nuclear war is worth initiating: or might be initiated by the adversary]" despite their having postulated such a possibility frequently to the public and having prepared for it at vast expense for two generations.

But that is not a difference from World War I! JB's title is meant to suggest a difference between the circumstances leading to a possible World War III and those leading up to World War I. Nuclear war is said, by the Harvard Nuclear Study Group, to present a "crystal ball effect," which keeps the risks of nuclear war very low because the devastation at the end of a major war is inescapably obvious and horrible in prospect to officials. (p. 11). "This crystal ball effect helps to give the nuclear world at least some measure of stability," these authors contended. (Actually, they inferred a very high measure of stability).

"The horror provoked by the prospect of a major nuclear war seemed to these authors so obvious, so catastrophic and so unequivocally irrational that it is equally obvious why statesmen leading the nuclear superpowers have usually remained very far from the brink." MUTUAL BRINK

A nuclear war would shatter the crystal ball, along with everything else--thus, the title--and this, the Harvard group and JB argue, could happen only "inadvertently." How does such "inadvertence" occur despite the possession of a crystal ball?

What is suggested above is that the crystal ball may present only a partial picture. It does not confront all civilian officials with a compelling awareness:

(a) That striking first may actually look significantly better than striking second: when the prospect of the latter forces them to look very seriously at the two "options". (They may be unaware of this even though their military has been preparing to enlarge and exploit this difference for many years, authorized by these high civilian officials and with resources budgeted by them and by Congress for this purpose).

(b) That this may also be true for their adversary; and that an adversary's first strike may come to seem imminently possible or likely for this very reason.

(c) That their actions in a political or limited war confrontations might have the consequences of creating these circumstances, where the possible advantages of limiting damage by striking first rather than second come into awareness of top officials on both sides; or, precisely which actions might have what consequences like these.

These are the possibilities that were missing from the awareness of civilian officials prior to WWI: not the horrendous, to be avoided at (supposedly) all costs, nature of a world war, which was virtually as obvious to them then as in today's nuclear world. They did not foresee the actual course of the war, or its duration, but on the other hand they exaggerated the economic and morale effects of the initial encounter in an all-out, industrialized war in bringing about the collapse of one or both of the contending parties. They saw it as catastrophic, unthinkable, in its effects on nation and empire, in much the same terms that we now see nuclear

war.

So they too had a crystal ball, with the same information--and the same limitations--as today's. And it too moderated Great Power behavior in numerous crises--leading to retreats and compromises and the avoidance of some confrontations. It was not the lack of a crystal ball with properties like today's that gave us World War I.

Just such a crystal ball existed, but the catastrophe it depicted came about anyway: and indeed, turned out to be even worse than had been imagined.

Would that war have been avoided if the full dimensions of the actual catastrophe had been seen clearly beforehand? Those who contrast the present situation with that in all earlier periods imply, "Yes." But that is very far from clear. In fact, I believe the answer is "No," in the long run, though the rulers might have been somewhat more cautious in a particular incident, such as that arising over Sarajevo.

This is assuming that the other properties--which also apply today--remained the same, including (a) preparations based on the assumption, and strengthening it, that preemption was much better than being struck first, and (b) a willingness to take the risk--underestimated, but not seen as zero--involved in threatening war or escalation against weaker allies of one's major adversary, and (c) unawareness (a clouded, or partly shrouded crystal ball) among some top civilian officials of the possible consequences of the above two conditions.

Given the technological "first strike advantage" in the era of World War I (like today) and the moral/psychological and gambling propensities of leaders then (like today), I do not believe that a still clearer picture than they possessed of the catastrophic character of all-out war would have made World War I markedly less likely in the decade in which it occurred.

There was indeed ignorance implicit in the decisions that led to World War I. But the critical ignorance was not lack of awareness that that major war (like today) would involve catastrophic risks of nation and empire, risks or certainties that outweighed any peacetime stakes. Rather, what leaders didn't know then, about the implications of their military preparations and the possible consequences of their alliances and threats and "demonstrations," are also matters of ignorance in high circles

today.

The nuclear crystal ball is shrouded today for many high officials--though, after World War I and a generation of strategic analysis, with less excuse--in just the same ways as before World War I. And the effect may again be the shattering of states and empires--and this time, civilizations, perhaps species, including our own.

An "inadvertent" nuclear war could come about exactly as World War I came about. (It could have come out of the Cuban Missile Crisis; or Berlin; perhaps Quemoy; or any of the first-use threats since, or Lebanon 1983). All the conditions present then exist today, and, I believe, there is no critical difference in awareness of the horrendous nature of a major war. The dangers of these conditions is knowable, foreseeable, though unknown and unforeseen by many, including some powerful authorities. The plans and their implications are less secret, more widely known and analyzed, than before WWI; yet not widely understood even within the anti-nuclear movement, or by many officials. Thus, I am not confident that this difference, either, is critical.

JFK, 1961. (HAG? HCN? R?)

JB's thesis is that top civilians "learned" experientially, in their guts, these possibilities during the Cuban Missile Crisis; and therefore moderated their behavior and their demands, making a peaceful resolution of the crisis possible. They learned, by their own and their adversary's reactions, that nuclear war could occur despite the "crystal ball," and this very awareness helped keep it from occurring. Knowledge that the crystal ball could shatter protected it: and no doubt will continue to do so.

JB finds in the fact of possible instability--loss of control, inadvertence--and in the likelihood that top officials will discover it and respond appropriately to it in an intense crisis, a new source of safety, comfort, security. He has discovered, in one more form, the "stability of instability." A new form of Churchill's formulation of the paradox of the balance of terror: security as the sturdy child of terror. "Out of this nettle, danger, we pluck this flower, safety."

Just as the horror of nuclear war deters statesmen, so their fear of losing control of events, of becoming unable to prevent a slide into nuclear war, makes them cautious in a crisis, protecting us all from what they fear. So crises like the Cuban Missile Crisis

are truly dangerous; but not as dangerous as they might be, or as they appear, because officials are likely to learn caution along with fear at the height of the crisis, if not earlier, and draw back from the brink.

Those are the twin lessons JB learned from the Cuban Missile Crisis: the second, final one, the bottom line, being reassuring, and explicitly supportive of the status quo of the arms race.

The first is valid, and important. It is supported by much of the newest evidence on the crisis; Garthoff's second edition emphasizes the new data on the ways in which control might have been lost.

But JB's second conclusion seems invalid, falsely and therefore dangerously reassuring, contradicted by much new data whose implications JB ignores.

It is true that McNamara did appreciate the possibility of events spinning out of control toward nuclear war, and that this did moderate his recommendations. (This fact may have been the germ of Blight's project, or of his projected findings, several years ago).

But nearly every other element of his argument, and thus his conclusions, is mistaken.

McNamara did not come to this awareness and concern just in the last 48 hours of the crisis, as a result of experiential learning during the crisis, as JB says repeatedly. He had this concern from the first hours of the "secret" crisis--i.e., before there were any responses from the Soviets--over ten days earlier.

To say this is to say that there is little or no evidence of critical "learning" during the crisis in this respect. But more importantly, it means that the risky actions that were taken--and serious risks of war were consciously taken, even though still more dangerous actions were rejected--were chosen after this appreciation of the risk of loss of control had become fully conscious to McNamara and the President.

Moreover, their concern, whether on the first day or the twelfth, did not lead to a peaceful resolution of the crisis, as JB repeatedly says. It was their ability to override and ignore their fears--at least temporarily and conditionally--that led to the actual resolution, essentially on their maximum terms. It was after the fears of escalation that McNamara expressed on October 27, which

*Like McN sitting on RT, 2 years later
C put, getting into it. Maudlin the tiger.*

Blight cites, that RFK was sent by the President with his ultimatum to the Soviets. (It does seem likely that, because of their fears, this ultimatum was a bluff; but Khrushchev didn't know that, and he settled on the terms of the ultimatum).

Blight reasons throughout as if the concessions Kennedy included in his ultimatum--in particular, the assurance of a "private" trade of the Turkish missiles, not to be alluded to as part of a deal--were critical to the Soviets' acceptance. But Kennedy and McNamara didn't expect that, and virtually no analyst believes that today. The fact is that although the President--in light of his and McNamara's fears--was personally willing to go further, even on Saturday, October 27 (as earlier), to make a public trade--which McNamara had earlier identified as the least concession likely to be effective--he was persuaded not to act on these fears or willingness on that day, but to maintain a tough position.

It was Khrushchev's fears, not Kennedy's or McNamara's, that led to the actual settlement, on Kennedy's tough terms: a clearcut defeat for the Soviets and victory for the Americans, not a "compromise." It was a "peaceful resolution" like the Versailles Treaty or the surrenders in World War II. (Given Castro's refusal of on-site inspection, the promise not to invade Cuba proved to be no more formal or reliable as a commitment than Castro had predicted).

The real lesson of the crisis is not that officials gradually learn the dangers of loss of control during the crisis and thus, at its climax, become cautious on both sides and end the crisis safely by mutual compromise, as Blight maintains.

It is that the crisis was precipitated as a physical, dangerous confrontation after and despite intense awareness at the highest levels of the risk of loss of control; and that despite the intensification of this awareness during the crisis, compromises believed to be essential to resolution without war were rejected or postponed while risky actions continued to be pursued (on both sides), till one side, not the other, abruptly and unpredictably surrendered.

affair to Emerson

If Khrushchev had, instead, held out, it does seem possible, even likely, that Kennedy would not have carried out his ultimatum.

He might have intensified the blockade; but before long, he would probably have conceded on Khrushchev's terms, perhaps the very next

day, Sunday, October 28. This inference is based on new evidence. That outcome would indeed have supported Blight's thesis.

(For that matter, Blight's argument does apply quite well--on the basis of my own interpretation of Khrushchev's motives in hastening to concede--to Khrushchev's actual behavior in ending the crisis, not to the Americans'. Blight has not modified his original manuscript to the point of exploiting these new data, or my thesis, on Soviet behavior.)

But the likelihood of Kennedy's going in that direction would have been sharply reduced if Castro had shot down low-level reconnaissance planes on Sunday. That would, instead, have likely begun a process of escalation. And Kennedy, despite his fears, had not called off such sorties for Sunday (though he did, finally, cancel both night reconnaissance and the U-2). It is this behavior, along with RFK's Saturday night ultimatum--which rejected the proposal of a public trade, at least temporarily, purporting to do so definitively--that contradicts Blight's thesis and his reassuring conclusion.

Ironically, in one major respect McNamara's and Kennedy's concern for loss of control (specifically, the possibility that a Soviet subordinate would launch a missile from Cuba under attack) did have a major moderating effect on their behavior, even larger than Blight ever recognizes. It now seems that they were preparing and at least strongly considering a possible invasion or air attack in the weeks before the missiles were discovered; and the discovery, and their fear of unauthorized Soviet launch under attack, actually led them (secretly even from the ExComm) to discard the practical notion of attacking or invading.

This is a dramatic support to Blight's thesis! (To mention it--as Blight does not--would involve suggesting that Kennedy and McNamara had been covertly contemplating and preparing clearcut aggression, and that they lied about it publicly, with McNamara still doing so, at Harvard.) And it does imply that the crisis was--because of their justified concern for loss of control--less dangerous than their public statements and preparations implied. It means that the latter amounted to bluffs.

But it is still not as reassuring as Blight suggests. Though they didn't attack immediately (and may have intended not to, ever), they did blockade, and they did send recon planes over, even after

firing on them had commenced (e.g., in the afternoon of Saturday, after the U-2 had been destroyed and one low-level plane damaged in the morning).

The historical lesson is: Statesmen may get relatively cautious in the face of the possibility of losing control. (Relative, that is, to their own previous impulses, or to the recommendations of extreme hawks). But not cautious enough, to avoid major danger. Nor willing to lose the contest, nor to make compromises, promptly, that might be interpreted as defeat. They don't become safe. Nor does the nuclear era, in their care.

Nuclear weapons are not safely entrusted to them.

Wednesday, 4 October